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ABSTRACT

Increasing parent involvement in the Pacific region requires an understanding of the traditional system of Pacific education. While historically Pacific education involved parents and community members as children's first teachers, the American model of education virtually ignores this tradition. The school assumes the entire responsibility for education, leading to the belief that school and home are separate domains. Interviews and discussions with Pacific residents focused on involving the traditional extended family in education, and identified barriers to and successful Pacific practices in family and parent involvement. Most barriers to family involvement are social and cultural, including lack of cultural awareness among teachers, importance of community and church events over school activities, low priority given to family involvement by some principals, and parental feelings of being unwelcome or uncomfortable in school surroundings. Three successful family involvement programs are: (1) the Hawaii Parent-Community Networking Center, which provides school-based community gathering places to develop a sense of community encompassing home, school, and neighborhood; (2) the Belau Family School Community Association, an advocacy group that helps to improve communication among family, school, and community and clarify the educational roles of each; and (3) the Chuuk Teacher, Child, Parent, and Community Project, which involves traditional community leaders and parents in helping schools teach health and nutrition education. (SV)

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PROMISING PRACTICES

IN THE PACIFIC REGION

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION: WHAT WORKS IN THE PACIFIC?

By Stan Koki and Harvey Lee*

In order to increase parents' involvement in Pacific education, educators must understand the traditional system of education in the Pacific region. Historically, the Pacific education system has involved community elders, leaders, churches, and parents as children's first teachers. The current system, however, is patterned after the American model of education, which virtually ignores the traditional system. The school assumes entire responsibility for educating a child, which takes responsibility away from the home and community and results in barriers between home, school, and community. Thus, a prevailing belief now exists among Pacific Islanders that the school is separate from the home and is an independent, government-run organization. Teachings about lineage and traditional culture are left to the family, and modern curricular instruction is the jurisdiction of the teachers and schools.

At the present time, very limited published research about parental involvement in Pacific education exists to help guide efforts to promote involvement. A recent research synthesis published by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) presents greater insight into parental involvement in Pacific education. Rather than focusing on parents only, the study uses the broader and more inclusive term *family*, which includes all who have responsibility for childcare—mothers, fathers, grandparents, foster parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and non-custodial parents. This definition is in line with the traditional education system in the Pacific region (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). PREL also conducted of a series of interviews and discussions with Pacific residents who are involved with PREL's Research and Development (R&D) Cadre, Pacific Curriculum and Instruction Council (PCIC), and Pacific Educators in Residence (PEIR) program. This paper summarizes PREL's major findings.

The Perceived Value of Parental Involvement

A fundamental barrier to increasing family involvement in Pacific education is that it is not closely aligned with Pacific cultures. Currently, attending school functions is of considerably less social value than holding titles and receiving public recognition. Consequently, participation in school activities does not carry as much credence as attendance at a village feast, where participation is expected. When parents do get involved in their children's edu-

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cation, they are not given a culturally appropriate form of recognition because their involvement is not seen as socially attractive or desirable. In cultures where title holding and social class standing are seen as important, participation in education must become socially desirable in order to be viewed as important.

Given this situation, it is understandable that many parents and some Pacific educators do not feel a responsibility to try to increase family participation in school. Some Pacific educators feel that parents do not "carry their share of the load." They think that parents often "dump" their children at school and relinquish their responsibility for their children's educational development. Other Pacific educators believe that parents who pay tuition for private education assume greater responsibility for their children's education and play a more active role in their children's academic lives. Because public schooling is not an inherent part of the traditional culture, many parents now see themselves as outsiders, rather than as significant stakeholders in the school.

Barriers in the Pacific Region

Some of the barriers inhibiting parental involvement in Pacific education are cultural in nature. According to PREL's study, Pacific educators may not be skillful in confronting parental involvement issues because they have not been provided with the requisite knowledge and skills. Currently, Pacific public schools do not actively encourage or assist in teachers' development of family involvement knowledge and skills. PREL's study confirms what is well documented by research: In general, teachers and school administrators do not know how to increase parental involvement and do not know how to capitalize on cultural backgrounds when dealing with parents and families. As a result, parents often become isolated and distanced from the school.

Some Pacific barriers to involvement reflect unique cultural conditions. In many instances, community comes before education. Therefore, if a village or community event takes place at the same time as a school event, the former takes precedence. Likewise, in some communities, the church plays a vital role in the community or larger society. School activities therefore may take a backseat to church activities that require community participation.

Numerous barriers to parental involvement in education are embedded within the procedures of contemporary schooling. In some island communities, the responsibility of involving parents is assigned to the principal. If the principal has a positive relationship and good communication rapport with parents, it is likely that there will be strong participation in school affairs. However, if the principal places low priority on parental involvement or does not communicate well with families, parents may feel unwelcome and unwanted at the school.

Communication plays a vital role in parental involvement. For parents and other family members to become involved in education, there must be two-way communication between the school and the home. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Some parents, especially those with high school students, are only contacted when there is a problem, which can be a very discouraging situation for parents. Positive, frequent communication encourages parents to assume greater interest in their children's education.

The conditions under which parents meet and communicate with teachers may also be a barrier. The physical aspects of areas where parents and teachers meet (classroom, conference room, school office) may seem unnatural and uncomfortable for parents. For example, a desk separating the two parties can create a barrier that makes relations uneasy. The desk and chair arrangement, so typical of classrooms on the U.S. Mainland, is not a normal part of some Pacific cultures.

Parental Involvement—the Pacific Way

Given the numerous barriers to parental involvement that are mentioned in national research literature, educators might ask, "Is there a Pacific way of involving parents in their children's education?" To investigate this question, PREL surveyed Pacific educators in order to develop a parental involvement profile and identify promising practices. Three successful practices were identified and, according to available evidence, seem to be effective in increasing parents' involvement in education (Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, 1998).

Hawai'i Parent-Community Networking Center (PCNC) Program

Parents are busy people. Many have more than one job, and their children often lack adult supervision at home. To increase parental commitment at school, the Hawai'i State Department of Education created the Hawai'i Parent-Community Networking Centers (PCNC) —school-based gathering places for parents, teachers, and members of the school community. A classroom typically serves as both the gathering place and site of the school's

PCNC program, and is staffed by a part-time facilitator who provides resources or refers families to community agencies for services that the school does not provide.

The mission of the PCNC program is to develop a sense of community in and among the home, classroom, school, and neighborhood, so that supportive networks for personal development and student academic achievement and performance are created and nurtured. The program follows a four-phase sequence: 1) developing relationships with parents, families, and networks; 2) developing relationships with school staff; 3) assisting in the classroom; and 4) building each student's personal learning network. The end result is higher student achievement and performance in a loving and caring environment, where all partners in education feel valued and appreciated.

The first PCNC was established in 1986, due to efforts of the Hawai'i Community Education Association. Three pilot sites were created, and their successes were documented by The Center for Adult and Community Education Development at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa. With the support of the Hawai'i State Board of Education, the Hawai'i State Legislature established the PCNC program statewide by passing Chapter 301, Sections 1 to 4, Hawai'i Revised Statutes. Currently, 155 PCNC programs are fully state-funded, 50 programs are partially funded, and 39 programs are being established. The goal is to have a center in every school within the Hawai'i public school system.

Belau Family School Community Association (BFSCA)

Many parents—especially those who have at-risk, economically disadvantaged, underachieving, or drug-abusing children—do not know how to communicate with the school. Often there are barriers that discourage information exchange between parents and schools. Many parents also lack assertive parenting skills, are intimidated by the school, and feel unable to reinforce school policies at home. To assist parents and the community in the Republic of Palau, the Belau Family School Community Association (BFSCA) was created. This organization represents a partnership among individuals and organizations—school staff, families, community, and students—in order to improve education and the quality of life for future generations of Palauans.

The BFSCA, which began with federal funds many years ago as part of the bilingual education program, is composed of members of various programs or agencies that are committed to helping improve education for Palauan children. Now financed by the Ministry of Education, the association provides services in all schools and enables parents and community members to work together to improve education in Palau and help all Palauan children become contributing and productive members of society.

The BFSCA has formed a Parent Advisory Council, which provides leadership in establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, and understanding among the family, school, and community sectors. The Parent Advisory Council has completed a policy and procedures manual, developed by-laws, and identified the roles and responsibilities of each partner. Regularly scheduled meetings improve communication and understanding among all stakeholders and, as a result, parents better understand their importance in their children's education and become motivated to work with the schools.

"We can tell the difference when we see the improvement in students, and the active involvement of parents and the community in school activities," says Hermana Umetaro of the Palau Ministry of Education. "Parents share their ideas and make recommendations for improvement. The big difference is seen in student grades."

Chuuk Teacher, Child, Parent, and Community (TCPC) Project

The Teacher, Child, Parent, and Community (TCPC) Project strives to improve health and nutrition education in Chuuk, one of the Federated States of Micronesia. The project's goal is to improve the health of school-age children in Chuuk by involving all schools in the implementation of health and nutrition education. The project evolved in response to three major health problems identified in the Federated States of Micronesia: Vitamin A deficiency in children; anemia due to malnutrition, inadequate food supply, poor food selection, lack of exercise, and inadequate nutrition education; and, among adults, high incidences of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. A major project focus is providing the community with information and training about health and nutrition education.

The TCPC Project, a networking effort of the Chuuk Department of Education, involves traditional leaders and parents in helping schools teach wellness concepts. A successful method of getting the information out to parents and the community has been to start with the traditional leaders. Community awareness of health and nutrition issues is heightened through partnerships with traditional

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Chuukese leaders because community members respect and obey traditional chiefs. The chiefs gave the project their stamp of approval after learning about health and nutrition issues, environmental concerns, the hot lunch program in the schools, and bio-intensive gardening for local food production and herbal medicines.

Once traditional leaders gave their support, training for teachers and parents began. Arranged by the Chuuk Department of Education health specialist, training focused on lessons that teachers can use in their classrooms; topics included health and environmental issues, supplementary feeding programs to offset malnutrition, and bio-intensive gardening. Parents received training at home to develop a sense of community and encourage backyard gardening of food crops. Therefore, students are able to discuss at home with their parents what they learn about health and nutrition in school.

The Chuuk TCPC Project demonstrates a strategy often overlooked by Pacific schools in parental involvement—first involve traditional leaders, and get their support. Then parental involvement in schools will become a reality.

Conclusion

The identification of these three models for parental involvement in education was assisted by Pacific educators involved in PREL's program of work. Assuredly, other promising models exist—the intent of this paper is not to be exhaustive, but rather to feature promising practices, identified by PREL's research, that are successful in bringing parents and schools together. These models could very well be adapted for other areas of the Pacific in order to increase parents' involvement in education.

Resources

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